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# Effects of Women's Studies Courses on Women's Attitudes and Goals

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## Abstract

Significant changes in attitudes towards women, their vocational and educational roles, and marital relationships were found in two groups of women's college students after exposure to women's studies courses in adolescent psychology and the psychology of women. Both experimental groups indicated more liberal plans for combining marriage and careers. They wrote of earlier resumption of careers after childbirth and greater willingness to share child rearing. In addition, the psychology of women students displayed a willingness to delay marriage. Similar changes were not found in a control group. Reliability data confirmed the utility of CPI and AWS but not SRSQ.

# Effects of Women's Studies Courses on Women's Attitudes and Goals

## Statement of the Problem

The area designated as women's studies has proliferated in this decade. Courses are taught on more than 900 campuses by well over 4,000 teachers (Howe, 1975). From 1970 to 1975, the number of programs rose from 2 to 152 (Howe, 1976). Many of these programs are interdisciplinary and general, while others have become increasingly focused on specific areas. Within women's programs, regardless of their nature, and even within institutions lacking formal programs, individual courses such as "Psychology of Women", have attracted interest (Berkowitz, Mangi, and Williamson, 1974). Little is available, however, on the impact of these courses on students (Daniels, 1975). Recognition of this problem was acknowledged by a federal grant for a review of women's studies programs, including an evaluation of their impact on students' vocational objectives (Review of Women's Studies, 1976). In one report available, Ruble, Croke, Frieze, and Parsons (1975) found students in women's studies courses changed in awareness of sex discrimination and in traditional beliefs regarding proper roles for men and women but not in personal expectations regarding careers.

The primary purpose of the present study was to discover the effects of two women's studies courses on the attitudes of students in a women's college toward women, self, sex role stereotyping, and plans for graduate school, career, marriage, and desired family size. A secondary objective was the consideration of the psychometric characteristics of certain scales currently used in research with women.

## Subjects

Seventy-seven undergraduates at a small women's liberal arts college served as subjects. The experimental groups were composed of students in "Psychology of Women" (PsyW) and "Adolescent Psychology" (PsyA), the two women's studies courses taught within the Psychology Department. The Control group consisted of students in "Psychological Statistics". The average age was 20 and roughly 80% of the respondents were white, Catholic, and middle class, representative of the school's undergraduate enrollment. Most of the students were psychology majors, with token representation from the other liberal arts. No freshmen were included.

## Procedure

During the first week of the semester, students were given Spence and Helmreich's Attitudes toward Women Scale (AWS), the California Psychological Inventory (CPI), the Sex Role Stereotype Questionnaire (SRSQ) used by Broverman and others, and a detailed questionnaire (which

covered, among other areas, post-college plans for education, career, marriage, and children). Three months later, approximately two weeks before final class sessions, the questionnaires were again distributed. Both pre- and post-test batteries were completed by over 70% of the students, resulting in n's of 20, 23, and 34, respectively, for PsyW, PsyA, and Control.

## Results and Discussion

### AWS

While considerably more liberal than those of the original AWS norms group (Spence and Helmreich, 1972), the initial scores of the students in this study were very comparable to the liberal arts upperclassmen in a moderate-sized, eastern, coed college cited by Stein and Weston (1976). From this normal base, nevertheless, it may be seen from Table I that significant differences between pre- and post-test

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Insert Table I

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scores were registered for PsyW and PsyA on Total Score, indicating that by the end of the women's studies courses more liberal attitudes about women existed. Examination of the subscales revealed significant

differences in mean scores for PsyW and PsyA on Scale I, relating to women's vocational, educational, and intellectual roles, and on Scale VI, dealing with marital relationships. PsyA also achieved a significantly higher mean on the subscale pertaining to dating. Great importance was not attached to this finding or to the lack of change on the remaining scales because of their extreme brevity.

Because the areas of change were congruent with the areas of discussion within the courses, a claim could be made for the effectiveness of women's studies. However, a significant change on Scale I was also found for Control. It is possible that attitudinal changes for all subjects may have been effected by the modeling of a female professor who was also wife and mother or simply by the allaying of anxiety specific to the inauguration of a new course. Since the Control group had significant change only in the subscale dealing with women's educational and vocational roles and not in the scale as a whole, it may be hypothesized that anxiety may have been operative for the Control group since statistics is a particularly dreaded course, initially, and students frequently articulate the increased feelings of competency and self-esteem which accompany its completion.

Of additional interest was the satisfactory AWS reliability data. While Spence and Helmreich (1972) provided none, Stein and Weston (1976) reported a split half coefficient of .92, and the more exacting test-retest procedures of this study yielded values of .85, .89, and .88 for PsyW, PsyA, and Control respectively.

CPI

On the CPI, means and reliability coefficients were similar to those in the manual (Gough, 1957). No significant differences were found for the experimental groups on the CPI scales measuring femininity, self-assurance, ascendancy, and inter-personal adequacy. There were, however, significant post-test differences for Control: a lower mean on femininity and higher means on five of the six traits associated with self-assurance. These changes, consistent with the significant results on Scale I of AWS noted previously for Control, seem to reflect a reduction in student anxiety and a gain in self-assurance associated with the discovery of competence, and perhaps particularly, competence in a typically masculine-typed task.

SRSQ

Results of previous studies with SRSQ (Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson, Rosenkrantz, and Vogel, 1970; Clarkson, Vogel, Broverman, Broverman, and Rosenkrantz, 1970; Rosenkrantz, Vogel, Bee, Broverman and Broverman, 1968; Vogel, Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson, and Rosenkrantz, 1970)

have commanded great attention. Although the questionnaire has evolved so that direct score comparisons among the subjects of the various studies are not possible, consistent use has been made of an extensive set of bipolar items which are usually rated for an adult male, for an adult female, and for self. Certain items are identified as male-valued and considered related to competency; others are viewed as female-valued and seen as designating warmth. Recommended scoring for the currently available 82 item form is based on traits found to be stereotypic in large and varied samples (Broverman, Note 1). While no significant differences on SRSQ were found for PsyW or Control, PsyA females saw males as more stereotyped post-test on both male-valued and female-valued traits. In other words, they came to view men as more competent and less warm. They also rated themselves significantly higher on male-valued traits, a trend interpreted by Clarkson et al (1970) as indicative of maturity and self-actualization.

Among others, Spence and Helmreich (1974) have pointed out the practical problems in administering SRSQ and Stricker (1977), the problems in interpreting it. Data analysis for this study raised questions about its validity and reliability. On the simplest level of content validity, questions of its appropriateness arose. In accordance with the guidelines for establishing stereotypic items (Broverman, Note 2), the

binomial test with $p < .001$ was applied to the data and not a single item met the criteria for group comparison. Even within PsyW, PsyA, and Control, individually, out of the 82 items, only 3, 1, and 7 items, respectively, were stereotypic. Relaxing the criterion for stereotypic items to the requirement that 75% of the group respond in a given direction increased the number of stereotypic items common to all three groups to nine. Since the recommended scoring system (Broverman, 1970) is based on 52 items found stereotypic in varied groups of students, serious reservations existed as to the validity of SRSQ for this study. In addition, of the 246 chi square analyses of pre- and post-test responses to individual items (82 items for each of the 3 groups), the number of statistically significant values was just about that expected by chance; i.e., 5%, and consequently, psychological significance could not be attached to these results. Finally, for purposes of this study, 8 SRSQ measures were defined; and only 3 of the resulting 24 test-retest reliability coefficients were above .70, and the median was .56.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire included items about the subject's future plans as well as her past and present. For the purposes of this study, it was primarily the former which were analyzed. Certain other items were examined,

however. For example the extent of exposure to women's issues was studied to insure the comparability of the groups prior to the study and to rule out the influence during it of experiences extraneous to the courses.

Questionnaire responses revealed no changes in plans to marry with 95 to 100% expressing this expectation. However, a significant number of PsyW indicated a post-test willingness to delay marriage, $X^2 = 5.53$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$. This finding may have resulted from the explicit consideration of women's roles in marriage which took place only in the "Psychology of Women" class. No significant changes were noted in desired family size for any groups.

There were no changes in plans for graduate school; 85 to 95% of the females either planned to attend graduate school or were considering it seriously. When career plans were examined, no significant changes were found in the sex typing of desired careers. With few exceptions the students elected teaching, social work, and other areas emphasizing typically expressive roles, a reflection of the high percentage of psychology students and a factor in turn affecting plans for graduate school. There were no changes in the level of aspiration within the groups.

Interestingly, both experimental groups did exhibit significant changes in the direction of more liberal post-marriage career plans, for

PsyW, $X^2 = 5.67$, df = 1, $p < .05$, and for PsyA, $X^2 = 6.02$, df = 1, $p < .05$. These plans included earlier return to work after childbearing and greater acceptance of sharing child rearing with husbands, other relatives, baby-sitters, and day care centers. While the students didn't change the type of career planned, they did anticipate greater post-marriage involvement after the women's studies courses.

A study by Ruble et al (1975) reported somewhat similar results in that women's studies students changed in the area of traditional roles for women but not in personal expectations regarding a career. Their students, however, did not display plans for greater involvement in career after marriage or a delay in marriage plans. The variation in results may come from differences in student samples, in course content, in pedagogical techniques, in instructors, in measuring instruments, or in their interaction. Future research should be concentrated on the systematic control of these variables and the eventual identification of the salient factors.

The importance within research of this type of content, context, and consent was shown in the analysis of another questionnaire variable, Menstrual Symptoms. Almost as frequently as not, PsyA and Control subjects reported fewer menstrual symptoms post-test than pre-test. Whereas, in PsyW, where research on the magnitude of premenstrual anxiety (Golub, 1976) was carefully reviewed, no one reported fewer

symptoms and 65% ($X^2 = 5.07$, df = 1, $p < .05$) of the females reported more symptoms post-test. Most typically tension was added to the symptom list. These results may suggest the medical student syndrome or simply that the discussion of symptoms within a scientific context signified consent to their existence.

## Implications and Conclusions

The data demonstrated that women's studies courses do effect changes in attitudes about women, particularly attitudes relating to women's vocational roles and marital relationships. AWS data were supported by post-test questionnaire responses indicating the greater acceptability of marital postponement and career involvement following marriage after exposure to women's studies courses. Whether future behavior will reflect these important attitudinal changes is a problem for continuing research.

The women's studies program apparently provides a supportive atmosphere in which attitudinal and possible behavioral change can occur. The significant gains in self-assurance found among the statistics students indicate future attention might profitably be directed toward exploring the effects on women of developing competencies in tasks normally viewed as masculine.

A final result of this study was the confirmation of the reliability of those instruments used in research on women, the AWS and the CPI, and the serious questioning of the validity and reliability of SRSQ.

Table I

*t* - Values for AWS

| Scale | PsyW | PsyA | Control |
|---|---|---|---|
| I Voc. Educ. & Intel. Roles | -2.83* | -2.93** | -2.38* |
| II Freedom & Indep. | -1.53 | - .54 | - .78 |
| III Dating & Etiquette | -1.39 | -2.64* | - .05 |
| IV Drinking & Swearing | - .21 | .69 | - .86 |
| V Sexual Behavior | - .17 | -1.01 | .17 |
| VI Marital Relat. & Oblig. | -2.77* | -2.72* | - .44 |
| Total | -2.74* | -3.49** | -1.44 |
| df | 19 | 22 | 33 |

*$p < .05$

**$p < .01$

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2. Broverman, I. K. Short form of the Sex-Role Questionnaire (82 items). Unpublished manuscript, 1970. (Available from I. K. Broverman, Worcester State Hospital, Worcester, Mass. 01604).

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